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Issue and Debate

C.I.A.'s Recruitment of Journalists for Covert Operations

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The sensitive issue of the use of journalists as intelligence agents flared up again last week when Adm. Stansfield M. Turner, the Director of Central Intelligence, said at a convention of newspaper editors that he "would not hesitate" to recruit a journalist for a covert operation "when it is vitally important to the nation."

His comments resurrected an old and passionate debate between two institutions whose views on the subject are virtually mutually exclusive. On one side is the Central Intelligence Agency, which holds that there are times when a foreign correspondent is in a unique position to serve his or her country by gathering or passing on information vital to the security of the nation and that to refuse to do so would be just plain unpatriotic. On the other side is most of the press, which contends that the use of even one journalist as an agent violates the integrity of all other foreign correspondents and perhaps even endangers their lives.

The Background

In 1976 it seemed that the debate had been stilled. George Bush, then the C.I.A. Director, announced regulations stating that the agency would not enter into any paid relationship with any full-time or part-time news correspondent accredited by a United States newspaper, news agency, periodical, radio or television network or station. Mr. Bush went on to say that as soon as feasible all such existing relationships would be terminated.

In November 1977, Admiral Turner issued a longer set of regulations, reiterating the ban on using journalists and also prohibiting the C.I.A. from using the name or facilities of any United States news organization to provide cover for any agency employees or activities. The last section of the regula-

tion said that there would be no exceptions to the prohibitions, except with the specific approval of the Director of Central Intelligence. There were those who felt that this last sentence negated all the other provisions of the regulation.

In recent hearings before the Senate and the House intelligence committees on proposed charter legislation for the intelligence agency, Admiral Turner disclosed that there had been three instances in the last three years when he had authorized exceptions. Two of these involved part-time journalists not currently employed by American news organizations and the other involved a nonjournalist employed by an American news organization. Admiral Turner said that none of the three had actually been pressed into service.

Against Use of Journalists

One of the principal roles of the press is to maintain scrutiny of government. To do this, journalists say, the press feels it must be entirely independent of government. Journalists say that the use by the C.I.A. of any journalists as agents casts suspicion on all journalists and raises the possibility that any one of them may be a Federal Government employee.

They say this reduces their effectiveness because news sources who might want to talk confidentially to a reporter might not want to risk it if there was any possibility that the reporter was a Government employee. In some cases, journalists say it could also endanger their lives if a foreign government suspects that they are intelligence operatives and not foreign correspondents.

The possibility of journalists being agents also casts doubt on the integrity of whatever they write, raising questions that articles may be Government propaganda or at any rate planted by the Government.

Journalists also firmly oppose the use of American organizations as cover for C.I.A. agents for the same reasons.

For Use of Journalists

Journalists make fine intelligence operatives, as far as the C.I.A. is concerned, because they can move about freely, take pictures and talk to people without arousing suspicions. They also often have good contacts within foreign governments.

The C.I.A. also argues that if it is publicly known that the agency is prohibited from using journalists, clerics

Government agencies, as now is the case, it reduces the agency's effectiveness. Observers point out that this limits intelligence agencies, more or less, to using businessmen and members of embassies and makes it easier for foreign governments that are trying to identify the American intelligence operatives.

Admiral Turner has said repeatedly that he respects the integrity of the press and that he would only use journalists as a last resort in a situation where national security or a life depended on it. He has said there might be situations involving terrorists when reporters might be the only people who move about effectively.

Admiral Turner made it clear to the newspaper editors that he neither agreed with nor fully understood their objections to the use of journalists as agents. He told the editors he was "bothered" by their contention that "if you accept an assignment from me, you are no longer free" and that "reporting information with us somehow profanes your work." He went on to state that he would expect a reporter who was approached by the C.I.A. to cooperate with it.

"I think a lot of correspondents are patriotic enough to do this," Admiral Turner said.

The Outlook

The Administration has opposed having a flat prohibition on the use of journalists as agents written into a C.I.A. charter. The major charter proposal, the Intelligence of Act 1980, proposed by Senator Walter D. Huddleston, Democrat of Kentucky, prohibits the use of certain institutions, including news organizations, as cover for any intelligence officer. It does not, however, contain a flat prohibition on the use of foreign correspondents as intelligence operatives.

If a charter is passed without such a flat prohibition, it would leave the use of journalists as agents up to the discretion of the director of the C.I.A. If no charter is passed, it would presumably leave the situation just where it is now, up to the discretion of the director of the C.I.A.

Admiral Turner's comments aroused newspaper editors and press groups. This week, a number of newspapers took strong editorial positions against the recruiting of journalists for undercover work, and these protests are evidently mounting. On the other hand, President Carter also spoke out on the subject this week and endorsed Admiral Turner's position. If Congress does not pass a charter providing for a ban the President has the final word on the subject. This makes it unlikely that a ban on the recruiting of journalists is